



Word Study is More Than Spelling

Franki Sibberson

When I was teaching kindergarten years ago, Chelsea ran into the classroom after a trip to the restroom. She was very excited as she yelled, "I found a word! I found a word! What does S-C-O-T-T spell?" As soon as children begin to talk, they become fascinated with words. And when they start to notice text, as Chelsea did, the excitement continues. As an upper elementary teacher, I want my students to keep this fascination of words. And, I don't want them to think of word study as something separate from all other learning and thinking that we do every day. I want them to know that word study is about more than spelling.

In his book **Word Savvy: Integrating Vocabulary, Spelling, and Wordy Study, Grades 3-6**, Max Brand reminds us that the goal of word study is more than isolated spelling and vocabulary. "My goal is for students to become word savvy--to develop an understanding of how words work within the context of reading and writing, and to become excited about words as they learn to manipulate them in playful ways."

For so many years, I have struggled with word study in my classroom. The vision I have had for how kids think about words has never matched what actually happens in the classroom. I know that embedded word learning can't really happen without a solid Reading and Writing Workshop in place. For children to see the power of words, it is critical that they have time each day to read and write. So, this workshop time is one of the most important structures that supports word learning. Lots of books and tools for writing are critical if kids are to use words in authentic ways. But, a Reading and Writing Workshop without a plan for embedded word study is not enough.

Our First Conversation About Words

Last year, I started the conversation about words in a different way than I had done before. Instead of asking students to do any of the things we'd done in the past (name charts, word sorts, word observations, etc), we began our conversation in a different way. Over the summer, I thought hard about the messages I had given my students in past years about word study. No matter what I did, the focus always seemed to be on correct spelling and vocabulary because the first lessons focused on words in isolation (sorting names, etc.) and kids often saw it as something separate from their reading, writing, speaking and listening.

So, last year, I began word study by asking my third and fourth graders to think about all of the times they were word learners -- all of the times in a day that they found themselves thinking about words. My goal in this conversation was for students to see that word study was more than just spelling and word sorts. As usual though, my students' thinking went beyond my expectations and I was thrilled at the possibilities of where this beginning conversation could take us over the year.

When Are We Word Learners?

1. When we read -- when we get to a new word and we use strategies to figure out how to say them or what they mean
2. When we can read words without thinking -- common words that we used to have to sound out but now we just know them
3. When we have strategies that help us figure out long words in our reading
4. When we hear or read a word we've never known before
5. When we wonder what a word means when we hear/see it when we talk, read, watch a movie, etc.
6. When we start using new words we've heard
7. When we love the way a word sounds like whimsical
8. When we are writing and we have to think about the spelling of a word
9. When we are writing and we try to use really good words
10. When we are writing and getting our ideas down with words
11. When we hear or use our favorite words
12. When we check our work for spelling and to see if it makes sense
13. When we use things like the dictionary or the walls to help us
14. When we learn words in different languages that are like words in English
15. When we figure out how to make animal sounds into words
16. When we understand words that are specific to something like soccer
17. When we study or practice words that are hard for us
18. When we try new strategies for reading and writing words
19. When we make up new words
20. When we can understand what our parents are saying when they are spelling something so that we don't understand
21. When we can figure a word out by yourself

The Word Study Envelope

After the amazing talk and thinking that came from this conversation, we had a good year of word study. Kids enjoyed words and used their learning in the context of reading and writing. I

am taking what I learned from last year and organizing a bit differently for the coming school year.

This coming year, I plan to give each child a word study envelope. [See Photo]

The word study envelope is designed to help students think about words throughout the day and to use that learning in the context of reading and writing. The envelope houses Have-A-Go sheets, a word list, and a small steno notebook, a tiny spiral notebook, and more.



Have-A-Go Sheets

I have found that Have-A-Go sheets are a great tool to support students' spelling. The have-a-go that I adapted from **Teaching Spelling: A Practical Resource** by Diane Snowball and Faye Bolton is the one I will include in this year's envelope. I'll put together a book of 10-15 double sided sheets for each student. Thinking through the spelling of words and having a tool to support this is critical.

Words We Use Over and Over and Over

By the end of 2nd grade, students should have command of the 150 (Snowball). So to support those who need it, students each have a list of the words in their word study folder.

Steno Notebook

This small spiral notebook slides right into a pocket of the envelope that houses the Have-A-Go sheets and the Words We Use sheet. The steno book will serve a variety of purposes. It is the place where students will do word work and is divided into sections for students to collect and keep track of the minilessons that we do in word study such as word observations and sentence study.

Mini-Spiral Notebook

I purchased tiny spiral notebooks for each envelope. In these notebooks, each student can begin to pay attention to language they love. This will be a place for them to collect great words and phrases in categories such as:

Words I'd Like to Use Sometime Soon
Words That Are Difficult For Me
Words That Are New For Me

Personal Word Wall

I borrowed this idea from Gay Su Pinnell and Irene Fountas. Giving kids a personal word wall allows them to collect the words that they are learning to use. This is individual so is different for each child.

Inviting Kids To Catch Themselves Thinking About Words

To give students a place to start sharing the times they catch themselves learning about words, I will use the walls in my classroom to give kids a tangible place for continuing conversations like these that we have in the classroom. Early in the year, I know that if students become fascinated by words and their thinking about them, this conversation can grow as the year goes on. So, I plan to put up a wall and share the spot with the students. This will be a place for students to share things with a post it note or a copy of a book page -- times when they notice that they are word learners.

I am hoping that this word study envelope and the invitation to share things they notice will change the way my students think about words. I am hoping that I am sending the message that word learning is really about reading and writing. I am hoping that by having the tools handy throughout the day, I can feed the fascination they naturally have with words while building their skills with words.

References

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